

Recommendation for Solid Waste Management Planning

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CITY OF DETROIT
OMBUDSMAN

City of Detroit Office of the Ombudsman

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"Getting Problems Out of the Way, So That Progress Can Occur"

Recommendation for Solid Waste Management Planning

The adoption of the FY 2006-2007 budget means that a new solid waste collection plan will be implemented for more than 200,000 households in the City of Detroit. Residents and commercial entities will be limited to Courville container service, and bulk pick-up will be restored quarterly. This plan is designed to save the City money and parallel collection service in the suburbs.

The problem with the plan is that collection service in the City won't be comparable to collection service outside the City. In Detroit, collection equipment will be solely dedicated to trash and garbage collection; whereas, in the suburbs, residents are required to separate waste so that three trucks collect trash, recyclables, and yard waste separately.

There is currently no state law that requires communities to recycle, and in Detroit, residents aren't encouraged to recycle because those items tend to "burn hot" at the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority (GDRRA). The same materials that burn hot have been prohibited from landfill disposal since March 2004 when Public Acts 34 and 35 of 2004 were enacted. On the other hand, a curbside recycling program would cost the City additional money because the City would need to purchase new equipment and train drivers. GDRRA operates a recycling drop off center for a few hours on Wednesdays and Saturdays, but that is the extent of recycling services available to residents.

There is a state law that bans the landfilling of yard waste. At one time, when the City collected bulk monthly, residents could separate yard waste from trash and set the yard waste out with other bulk items to be collected separately. Now with a leaner bulk collection program, residents don't have a yard waste collection option. It is of no consequence at the moment because solid waste in Detroit goes to GDRRA, not a landfill.

However, if the City gets to the point where GDRRA is closed and landfilling is the only disposal option, yard waste will have to be separated in order to comply with Section 324.11506(7) of Part 115, Solid Waste Management, of the Michigan Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA 451, as amended (Act 451) which has been in effect since March 1995. Landfill operators will not accept yard waste or plastic beverage containers mixed with trash and risk fines resulting from non-compliance. Municipal solid waste collected in the City must be separated from yard waste, and a yard waste provision will be stipulated in any landfill agreement.

The Budget Department reported that the \$80 million-plus debt service for GDRRA would be paid in full in the year 2009. This means that the City has a small, 18-month window to develop an environmentally-sound, solid waste collection and disposal plan.

It is for these reasons that I am recommending that the City Council and Mayor appoint a Blue Ribbon Committee to research, study, and develop a solid waste management plan for the City of Detroit by the end of FY 2006-2007. Over a period of 12 months, this committee could produce a workable plan, one year before being implemented, so that a structure to receive viable alternative plans for a comprehensive solid waste management program can be solicited; a full-blown education program can be developed; and a close estimate on the cost of these services can be determined. An emphasis on an education program would help to ensure that residents would be completely prepared for a newer, more sustainable solid waste management program.

Solid waste management programs vary throughout the state and the country.

The Blue Ribbon Committee can look for best practices and determine what works for the City of Detroit:

- Some communities have single haulers.
- Some communities have subscription service.
- Some communities collect waste using a volume-based system.
- Some communities offer curbside recycling, and some don't.
- Some communities ban plastic bags for yard waste collection.
- Some communities do direct billing.
- Some communities add collection fees to water bills.
- Some communities own and operate landfills; Detroit does not.

Lack of transportation is an issue.

The City operates six drop-off sites for bulk items. These sites are open Tuesday through Saturday from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. during the winter and from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. in the non-winter months. Accessibility is not an issue, but getting there is a problem.

Residents who do not have transportation do not have the means to get to the drop-off sites. Even residents who do have transportation are not willing to pack unwanted bulk items into their vehicles. For senior citizens and persons with disabilities, few options for bulk disposal represents an added hardship.

The majority of Detroit residents are law abiding citizens.

Obviously, this is a time of shrinking resources and competing interests. As a result, illegal dumping has taken center stage, and bulk item collection has been placed on the back burner. Bulk pick-up and illegal dumping should not be confused. Households everywhere have a need to dispose of bulk items from time-to-time, and residents want to be able to get rid of junk legally.

Perhaps, the City has been lenient over the years when there were no restrictions placed on the amount of bulk that could be set out. Solid waste management collection plans outside the city typically include the pick up of one bulk item every week without additional charges, excluding white goods. The Blue Ribbon Committee could recommend a bulk collection program with similar restrictions.

Education is critical.

A well-organized community education program is essential. A major part of the committee's responsibility will be to develop a campaign and promote awareness through the use of mailings, Public Service Announcements, Web Broadcasts, etc. In the event that landfilling is the only option, residents must be educated about yard waste and plastic beverage container separation, or any landfill agreement will be jeopardized.

The Blue Ribbon Committee is really Green.

The *Green* Ribbon Committee for the City of Detroit needs to include a variety of stakeholders. Members should be committed and represent the following:

- Department of Public Works
- Department of Environmental Affairs
- Planning & Development Department
- Finance Department
- City Planning Commission
- Department of Transportation
- Developers
- Community Development Corporations
- Private Sector
- Environmental Groups
- Neighborhood Associations
- Block Clubs
- Labor Organizations
- Industry Experts
- Realtors

One full year of work is recommended because the task is monumental. The committee can be charged with providing input on a Request For Proposal from landfill operators that recognize that the solid waste management needs of the City are more complex than a simple disposal replacement for GDRRA.

The current plan is only temporary.

Budget problems and outdated policies are responsible for the knee-jerk reaction to solid waste collection concerns in the City. As a City, we have an opportunity to develop a collection and disposal plan that will meet the needs of a community now and in the future. Therefore, the recommendation from the Office of the Ombudsman is that the City Council and Mayor act now to adequately address the solid waste management needs of the City of Detroit.